

State of the art Saturday March 5, 2016
Nancy Bauer

The stories of old Miramichi

Wayne Curtis brought me his new book of short stories, *In the Country*, published by Pottersfield Press. This is his 16th book; the others include three novels and collections of essays, memoirs, poetry, centering primarily on the area around his birthplace on the Miramichi River in the 1950's.

Curtis' memory for the details of that farming, lumbering, and fishing life is remarkable. I believe every word. In his introduction, he writes, "While there is an element of truth here, the narration and the characters in this book are lifted out of my imagination and should not be associated with anyone living or dead." Do you see the problem? I've been wrestling with this problem in the short stories of others—of M.T. Dohaney for one and of my own. Curtis states that in order to write about the country, "you have to have seen the birds that nest in the fireplace chimney, to have heard the discreet melodies of a cold autumn wind in the pine trees, the melancholy stovepipe that reveals the quality of the firewood by the scent of its smoke..." His sense of place is palpable. One of the essay-like stories, "Of Bells and Berries (In Praise of the Black Currant)" is a tour de force in its fascinating description of how these special currant bushes grow, connecting the account to "the clang of the scythe stone" because the space in between the bushes must be scythed. The narrator of the story brings a bush from his old farm to his Fredericton home in order to save this exceptional species. Is this "I" a fictional character or Curtis himself? Is this bush really going to be saved?

I'm captivated by the life that Curtis portrays. From using a cream separator to catching a salmon to stacking wood, I am THERE, participating. "Wheelbarrowing stove wood into the shed and tiering it in place" their hands get blistered and bleed. "Papa bathed our palms with turpentine and bandaged them with cotton rags."

I think maybe my unease has to do with my growing old. I've read so much realistic fiction, have studied it, taught it, written it, and know the tricks of the trade. Is this contradiction between the realistic details of a story and its fictional characters why fiction that doesn't pretend to be real is so popular: zombies, vampires, science future, historical past and magic as in the Harry Potter novels?

In a lucky synchronicity, I've learned how New Brunswickers use the word "hovel." I've always used the word to mean a dwelling house that is poor and wretched. In this province the word seems to mean an outbuilding. Hazel MacQueen defines the word as "a log barn used in the lumberwoods." In his story "In the Country" Curtis writes, "And the roadside pine trees, with their silvery needles that whispered in the breeze, cast shadows that stretched across the yard and bent upward against the side of the hovel, the velvety shingles of which were already blackened by the shower."

The wind quintet Ventus Machina--flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, French horn--gave a most entertaining concert based on opera. They played the overture to "The Barber of Seville",

selections from “Les Miserables” and from “Carmen.” Onto the scene strode soprano Monette Gould, with her witty and musically splendid interpretations of the words of Carmen and Les Miserables.

University of New Brunswick students taking a music class were present, their assignment being to write their impressions of the concert. In the small room at St. Thomas University’s Margaret McCain Hall, we were seated on the same level as the performers, only a few feet from them. That degree of intimacy, even in chamber music, is rare, precious. It was as if they were in our living room playing just for us. I wondered if the students appreciated their good fortune.

The program informed us that Ulises Aragon, the French horn player, is a “soloist and all-round superstar transplanted from Venezuela’s famous Simon Bolivar Orchestra.” The knowledgeable woman sitting next to me told me he was “world-class”. I was especially interested in watching him because my granddaughter plays the French horn. At intermission, the other musicians came out, one waving a Canadian flag, to announce that Aragon had that day become a Canadian citizen. We all cheered.

The group was formed only in 2011, but the program states that already, “The undeniable chemistry between the members of Ventus Machina is apparent in their flexible and unique style of performance. Each from vastly different geographical and cultural backgrounds, the five musicians have truly found their common musical language.” They did seem to be having much joy in their performance. Three of the members also play with Symphony New Brunswick: oboist Christie Goodwin, bassoonist Patrick Bolduc, and Aragon. Clarinetist James Kalyn is a professor at Mount Allison University and flutist Karin Aurell teaches there.